

Saint Louis Audubon

Bulletin

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PARROT-WATCHING

by Dr. Hampton L. Carson

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and a Vice-President of the St. Louis Audubon Society

To most of us North American bird-watchers, a parrot is something that seems to be beneath our dignity—an improbable sort of bird that has no reality in the out-of-doors. We consider it to be fit only to sit on the shoulder of a pirate or to comfort an old maid. Although I once thought this too, let me hasten to tell you that I now know better. Our Latin American tropical forests are full of a variety of engaging parrots. These have been a source of both delight and frustration to me during various travels in Central America and Brazil.

Now, on these excursions I was supposed to be collecting fruit flies for research on genetics, and I really did this very diligently. What we do is to go out into the forest with short-handled nets and swish the flies off any kind of rotten or fermenting fruits that can be found. We were, I think, a somewhat puzzling little crew—myself, my wife Meredith, and two colleagues from the University of Texas—as we worked around in the back country of Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia a summer ago. I don't think that it was our rather shabby clothes or muddy boots that distinguished us, nor was it the portable laboratory gear or even the collecting nets. The thing that created a special air about us was, I am pretty sure, the large plastic sack of fermenting fruit that went everywhere with us.

You see, you cannot always be sure of finding native fruits to collect flies from, so we lug along this bag of fly-bait just in case. I don't know why we used a plastic bag, but I think that it just happened to be around and struck us as being relatively drip-proof, thus having a definite advantage over a gunny sack. You could see what was going on inside: the fierce fermentation resulted in a gray, frothy homogenate. Into the sack, where they quickly lost their identity, went the rottenest specimens we could buy in the markets—mango, papaya, anona, goyaba, inga, jacca and even ordinary things like orange, banana and pineapple. Now most Latin Americans are terribly polite and pointedly incurious. They are furthermore rather used to the

strange ways of gringos. Our bag nevertheless usually drew to us that single, quick, intense stare which attempts (in this case I am sure without success) to read the mystery in an instant. I think that next time we will carry our jungle juice in something less transparent.

But to get to the parrots. When fruits are rare on the forest floor, our procedure usually is to carry the bag inside the woods for a distance, slop out a fragrant little pile in a clearing and then wait for the flies to smell it and come. This is the especially nice part of it, this waiting around. You see, it takes the flies twenty minutes or half an hour to collect around the bait in any numbers. Then it takes only a few seconds to sweep up a lot of flies. Then you have to wait again.

For the naturalist in me, these little intervals, spent leaning against a tree or sitting on a log, contained some moments that I will never forget. No, it is not the big things that you see. Just maybe a little blue and gold lizard settling in a spot of sun to warm himself, an iridescent blue Morpho butterfly going by or a solemn line of parasol ants. The sensationalists have given an entirely wrong impression of tropical nature, and it takes quite a while to dispel the childhood misconception of a weird, steamy jungle, dripping with snakes, swarming with huge insects, slinking with jaguars and deafening the ears with wild jungle noise. It's just not so. The tropical rain forest is a cool, quiet, safe and friendly place for those who have eyes to see it as it really is.

Individual species are rare in the rain forest; nothing is common. This means no "stands" of one species of tree, like our northern spruce forests and, delightfully, no swarms of mosquitoes, either. The web of life here is incredibly intricate, with every living thing delicately adjusted to other living things. But there are almost always parrots of some kind and seeing these in the wild has a special appeal for me. And this is where the frustration comes in, too. Parrots always find you first and then set up a terrific racket of scolding noise. The effect of this on the would-be parrot-watcher is, of course, to make him crane his neck to see the source of the noise. Parrots react to neck-cranings, or any other motion for that matter, with deep suspicion so that they place about 98 percent of themselves behind some kind of vegetation and retain this position, relative to the watcher, no matter where you move. The insulting part of their behavior is their obvious interest in man-watching, and one always gets the impression, when it is all over, that they have gotten a much better idea of what you look like than vice versa.

So my visual impressions of parrots in a state of nature are constructed from a flash of green here, a splash of yellow there (was it on the head or rump? was he hanging upside down then or not?) and quite often only a single suspicious eye ogles at you from between the leaves. I must admit that I do not know how many species I have tried to see. In fact, any kind of birding in the rain forest is pretty futile even when you try your luck with less elusive birds than parrots. It's almost always dark inside the forest, even when the sun is shining above, and then also you can be sure that it's not called a rain forest for nothing.

But surely the most improbable parrots of them all are the macaws. Go to our bird-house at the zoo and look at those garish beasts in the cages over near the toucans. Monstrous things, red and yellow and green and blue; three feet long and about two-

thirds tail. Until last summer, I had never seen a macaw in the wild although I had been through macaw terrain (it was alleged by companions) a number of times. Several times I had missed seeing one (it was alleged by companions) because I just wasn't looking in the right direction and it got to be a source of some annoyance to me. Let's face it: the macaw is one of the rarities of the tropical forest, and to see one is perhaps the parrot-watcher's most cherished hope.

July a year ago our little group had slopped for two hours through a drenched Costa Rican cacao plantation and far up the side of a low costal mountain through the tangled weeds and semi-pasture of the second growth to the fringe of an uncut segment of the original rain forest that once covered the area. Don't think that such places are easy to find. Almost everywhere in the American tropics that the road, railroad or boat have gone, the axe and the charcoal pits have followed and the rain forest is no more. When we stepped from the thick, hot and airless second growth into the cool, lofty forest our spirits rose. Under the three stories of forest trees, the panorama was dim but open, like a cathedral, with the boles of the upper-story giants rising up to the green roof like pillars.

Then it came out of the silence, the deafening raucous clamor of a super-parrot. I caught barely a glimpse of a long green streak high above me in the distant branches. I had a good idea what it was, and I was equally sure that I wouldn't get a better look at it. But about the latter point I was wrong. None of us had noticed the disappearance of our guide, and I am afraid that this story has to have a very human ending. The diet of a plantation worker's family, especially in Costa Rica, is almost pathologically short of protein. A shot rang out and soon he was walking toward us with his incredible armful of rumpled green and yellow and red. It was a hollow moment for the city folks—the conservationists from the United States, land of the thick steak. There was a long moment of silence.

"Muy bonita" suggested Meredith, looking at the macaw. There was considerably more than a trace of sadness in her voice.

"Si, Signora" replied our guide and then, with an almost angelic shy smile, while he patted his stomach suggestively, he said: "y que sopa!"

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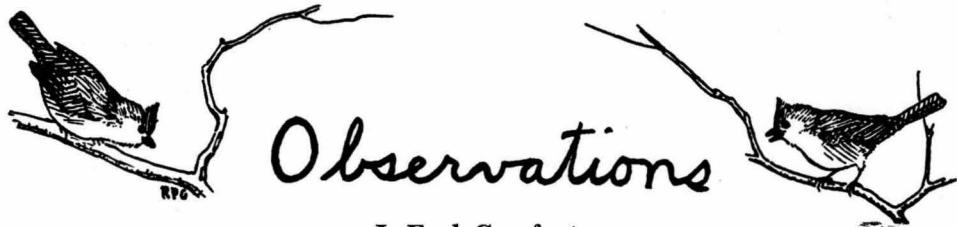
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J. Earl Comfort

The St. Louis Area heavy flooding rains of June and July played havoc with wildlife, especially ground nesters, although many adult birds also succumbed. Among the mammals cotton tail rabbits were hardest hit. Fortunately, broods and litters were successfully reared later in the summer when nesting conditions became normal.

The customary draining of our favorite Marais Temps Clair marches in St. Charles County was impossible after the wildfowl hunting season because of periodic hard rains, depriving us of our usual late spring and early fall shorebirding formerly made possible each year at extensive mud flats created by drainage. But we were compensated by flushing an extremely rare purple gallinule there on May 25th when Albert Bolinger, Earl Hath and Earl Comfort made a late spring tour of the marshes occupied by nesting grebes, coots, gallinules, bitterns and herons. The rare gallinule was later found by Dick Anderson and Jack and Johnnie McDonald.

Eugene Wilhelm made the birding headlines by locating a flock of wild turkeys near St. Genevieve, Mo. on March 31st and by flushing a female ruffed grouse from a clutch of 12 eggs in the same general area May 15th. There were several other listers of both rarities through the courtesy of Gene, who co-operated with other eager listers. Both species were first modern records within our 50 mile St. Louis radius.

There were three Audubon picnics, one at the Rice Estate near Antonio, Mo., one at Principia College, Elsah, Ill., and the last at the famous Possum Trot Farm with Len and Ginnie Hall host and hostess. The Possum Trot outing, on May 11th, drew some 500 visitors in spite of threatening weather that had the Belevieu Methodist Church luncheon committee in a dither as dinner was being prepared for some 400 who held reservations. But, with the cessation of the rain, all was well and several bird walks were quickly under way under the able direction of Ginnie. A total of 103 species set a record for a day's Possum Trot roundup, as did the number of diners and number of visitors, most of whom participated in the nature walks. Through the pre-arrangement assistance of Connie and Earl Hath and under the smooth direction of the Halls we enjoyed one of our most pleasant visits, aided and abetted by the appetizing lunch. Afternoon nature walks completed the day with congenial Len Hall and Tiger, his Irish setter, the most popular leaders. Credit for listing many of the ground inhabitating bird species goes to the energy of the bird dog. The Harris Teachers Ornithology class was in attendance en masse.

There were four Forest Park spring bird walks in late April and early May as well as two scheduled for the Saturdays of April 27th and May 4th under the capable and faithful leader-

ship of Camille and Lois Wamhoff at Shaw's Garden. The first Shaws walk was rained out as were several other scheduled nature trips in April and May. Warblers were the greatest attraction at Forest Park where such rarities as hooded, sycamore and Cape May species were listed. Records fell for the total number on two of the park walks.

The four Harris Teachers Ornithology field trips were under the direction of Dr. K. C. Sullivan, of the college, and under the leadership of Earl Hath and Earl Comfort. The most popular of the trips was at the August A. Busch Wildlife Management Area at Weldon Springs where area biologist, Bruce Dowling, led the group between showers.

The always popular annual spring Beulah Bedell warbler walk at Creve Coeur Lake took place on schedule May 18th in spite of heavy rains. With the warblers showing more common-sense than their would-be observers, our list was quite low as the birds remained under shelter.

The short summer lull in bird watching, as usual, got a welcome brush off with the early return of shorebirds in mid-July. Credit for the identity of a rare buff-breasted sandpiper at Creve Coeur Lake on August 11th goes to Sally Springer. It was the first local listing of this species since 1953. Other good listings in this intriguing family were white-rumped, Baird's, and western sandpipers, Wilson's phalarope and black-bellied plover.

Our Society is greatly indebted to Thelma Thalinger, our patron of publicity, for her untiring and generally thankless work in our behalf, especially through arrangements of programs at radio station KFUO. We are also indebted to our many Audubon members who participated, especially to Dick Grossenheider who made several tape recordings for the interesting KFUO nature hour.

ALBERTA M. BOLINGER NEW EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

Miss Alberta M. Bolinger, 5079 Waterman Avenue, has accepted the office of Executive Secretary of the St. Louis Audubon Society to replace Mrs. Ernestine Magner, who resigned recently because of the pressure of family duties. Mrs. Magner's resignation was regretfully accepted by the Board, whose members expressed deep appreciation of the fine and devoted service that she rendered to the Society during her six years as executive secretary.

A member of the Society before the organization joined the National Audubon Society, and a former treasurer, Alberta Bolinger is well known to our members. Aside from active devotion to the cause of conservation, Miss Bolinger also brings to her new job expert business experience as she is in the Real Estate Department of the Bank of St. Louis. She is also secretary of the Missouri Audubon Society. The Board feels extremely fortunate to have secured the time and services of such a highly qualified, but very busy, lady to carry on the executive secretaryship. A few weeks ago she returned from a three weeks' summer vacation camping at Two-Medicine Lake in Glacier National Park. She shared the trip with Dorothea Vogel, a member of the Audubon Society.

TUNE IN

Audubon members and all lovers of the out-of-doors should be interested in a series of broadcasts now on the air on Station KSLH, the radio outlet of the Division of Audio Visual Education of the St. Louis Public Schools.

Anyone who has an FM receiver may get KSLH by tuning to 91.5 mc on the frequency modulation band.

KSLH is now cooperating with the National Audubon Society in broadcasting a series of wildlife programs that are unusual in many respects.

The titles that will be of interest to our members and others are broadcast on Tuesdays from 3:15 to 3:30 p.m. and include the following:

October 29 BIRDS IN YOUR GARDEN
November 5 THREATENED SPECIES
November 12 BIRD NESTS
November 19 BIRDS IN THE NIGHT

Another series on Fridays from 3:15 to 3:30 include the following titles:

October 25 HOW TO KNOW TREES
November 1 HOW TO KNOW WILD FLOWERS
November 8 THE SEA AROUND US
November 15 POCKET GUIDE TO BIRDS
November 22 EUROPEAN BIRDS
December 6 THE STARS
December 13 THE DESERT YEAR
January 10, 1958 BIRDING AS A HOBBY

Produced by the National Audubon Society and distributed by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters of which KSLH is a member.

ST. LOUIS AUDUBON BULLETIN

PUBLISHED BY

The St. Louis Audubon Society

Earl H. Hath..... President
Mrs. Thelma Thalinger..... Editor
Miss Alberta Bolinger..... Executive Secretary

WISE MEN SAY—Use the talents you possess, for the woods would be very silent if no birds sang except the best.

—Barnstable Patriot.

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HAVE YOU BEEN TUNING IN ON KFUO: 830 ON YOUR DIAL?

Beginning on March 12th, this friendly radio station began presenting St. Louis Audubon Society radio programs on wildlife and conservation, each Tuesday morning at 9:00, and within recent weeks "airing" the new National Audubon Society series, "Songs of the Wild" on two mornings a week—Tuesdays and Fridays. We feel fortunate that Mr. Brad Motsinger, station manager, interviewed our speaker-experts on their various specialties. He is enthusiastic about our programs and plans to continue them, again once a week on Tuesdays, but with a slight change in time—9:15 a.m.

Now that the National Audubon series has ended, the program format will be changed to a panel discussion on all phases of wildlife in this area, and the importance of practicing conservation. Members of the panel will be President Earl Hath, ornithologist Earl Comfort, Forest Park Bird Walk chairman Martin Schweig, Jr., and mammal-bird artist, Richard P. Grossenheider. Moderator of the program will be biology-teacher Rex Conyers of University City Senior High School. Doesn't it sound good—but tops?

If you are free to hear the program, and enjoy it, may we ask you **please to write in** to KFUO Radio Station, St. Louis 5? To achieve a good rating (which you all know we deserve!) we need expressions of appreciation from our own listener-members and their friends. We also welcome requests for topics to be discussed, ideas of all kinds to improve the program and criticisms—constructive or critical. This station reaches some 2,000,000 listeners (all the area music lovers, of course). It is of the greatest value to our cause of conservation for expressed support of our program. It doesn't take long to write a message on a two-cent postcard.

And here is further good news: Mr. Motsinger has interviewed a number of Audubon Society people on KFUO's popular "Twelve to One" Sunday show, among them Dr. John D. Whitney, well known conservation-worker and Dean of Instruction at Harris Teachers College, and Leonard Hall of Possum Trot, our spring picnic host, whose newest book, "Country Year," has been very well received by the American public . . . Please tell your friends about our radio program!

Thelma Thalinger, Radio Program
Coordinator

NEW A.O.U. CHECK LIST

The American Ornithologists' Union announce publication of the fifth edition of

The American Ornithologists Union check-list of
North American Birds.

This authoritative volume was prepared by the A.O.U. Committee on Classification and Nomenclature, Dr. Alexander Wetmore, Chairman.

The 691 page book contains the full classification of all North American birds, the latest decisions on common and scientific names, and detailed descriptions of the geographic distribution of all species and subspecies recorded from North America.

Order from Bob Hecht whose ad appears in our Bulletin or from American Ornithologists' Union, Farnow Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Price \$8.00.



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SCHEDULED FIELD TRIPS

On Saturday, October 26. Arboretum at Gray's Summit. Meet at entrance at 8 a.m.

On Saturday, November 23, Creve Coeur Lake. Meet at refreshment stand at 8 a.m.

Leaders—Earl Comfort and Earl Hath.

NEWS BRIEFS

Marriage of Miss Charlene Duncan of Washington, Missouri and Mr. James Jackson, St. Louis, Missouri. Mr. Jackson is with the Education Department of the Missouri Conservation Commission. Mr. and Mrs. Jackson are at home in Washington, Missouri. Our best wish for happiness to Charlene and Jim!

The Missouri State Conservation Commission announces the opening of a branch office in the old Court House at Clayton, Missouri. The telephone number is VOLunteer 1-6800.

Sponsored by the St. Louis Audubon Society, Missouri Conservation Commission and Harris Teachers College, fall and spring courses for teachers in Conservation (fall) and Ornithology (spring) are again in full swing. Classes for teachers only, are limited to forty.

It was with great regret that the Board accepted the resignation of James Comfort as editor of the Audubon Bulletin. His successor is Mrs. Oscar (Thelma) Thalinger, vice-president of the Board and Publicity Director of the Society.

The St. Louis Audubon Society will again sponsor Audubon Screen Tours this season, bringing five of North America's best-known naturalists, wildlife photographers and lecturers to St. Louis, according to Earl Hath, president of the local Society.

Frank William Hall, head of the Department of Photography at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, will lead off the series with his newest color film, "Hawaii-U. S. A." on October 25, in the auditorium of the Southwest High School, 3125 South Kingshighway, at 8:15 p.m.

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